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Iridescent Surfaces: Reflections on Art and Oil

Heather Davis

Just as nature can no longer be understood as a pristine and discrete realm apart from human activity, art's autonomy is all the more untenable when faced with ecological catastrophe.
— T.J. Demos, "Art After Nature," 2012

What if oil is *fundamental* to the societies we have now?
What if it shapes them in every possible way and at every possible level, from . . . the nature of our built infrastructure, from the objects we have ready to hand to our agricultural and food systems, and from the possibility of movement and travel to *expectations* of the capacity to move and interact?
— Imre Szeman, "How to Know about Oil," 2013

Left: Heinrich Friedrich Füger, *Prometheus bringt den Menschen das Feuer* (Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind), 1817, oil on canvas, 55 × 41.5 cm, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; right: Frans Masereel, *Prometheus*, 1954, woodcut, 55 × 40 cm

Anthropocene Fires

At the end of the summer in 2020, the west coast of the United States was ablaze. It was the same summer when the hottest temperature on Earth was recorded—a staggering 56.7 Celsius in aptly named Death Valley, California. The wetlands in Brazil, one of the world's most densely biodiverse regions, were left charred and smoldering following a season of similarly destructive fires. All this was only eight months after unprecedented bushfires in Australia burned approximately 97,000 square kilometers, where habitat loss meant that endangered

species were even more in peril, and human fetuses were at risk from their mother's exposure to the smoke. The devastation and force, the world-altering power, of these recent fires is hard to imagine.

Fire is, under many circumstances, a gift. The myth of Prometheus narrates the god stealing fire as an act of defiance and reward. Heinrich Friedrich Füger's *Prometheus bringt den Menschen das Feuer* (Prometheus Brings Fire to Mankind, 1817, p. ##) is celebratory, heroically displaying Prometheus bestowing fire upon humanity. The representation by Frans Masereel in his woodcut *Prometheus* (1954, p. ##), created over a century later, is more ambiguous—a vaguely threatening depiction that captures the realities of fire, as horror and plentitude. Masereel's tone seems to hover between the fire in my neighbor's backyard, the refuge of community in Covid times, where indoor gatherings are forbidden, and these bush fires that have annihilated ecosystems and communities.

In the late nineteenth century, fire, like virtually everything else at the time, was enclosed and industrialized. It was sequestered to combustion engines, where it was turned into the metaphorical and literal fires of the Earth under conditions of climate crisis. Indeed, the fires of climate crisis are made intensely visible in the increasingly dangerous methods of fossil fuel extraction—the ongoing flares from fracked gas in the United States, and gas flares burned off oil wells in the Niger Delta. Throughout Pennsylvania, New York, and North Dakota, the flames of fracked gas can be seen, eerily lighting up the night skies, reminiscent of candles, but candles for the gods. In North Dakota, these flares are such a significant source of light pollution that they are visible in satellite images, comparable to major metropolises like New York. These extraction fires burn down as they burn up. As the historian Stephen J. Pyne writes, "They are burning through deep time, combusting lithic landscapes from the geologic past and releasing their effluent into a geologic future."[1] These fires are implicated with late-stage oil extraction, lit to get rid of "excess" or "waste" byproducts that allow for further oil and natural gas to be extracted. In the Niger Delta, gas flares create a hellscape of relentless burning and smoke, severely impacting people's health, despite ongoing local activism and resistance, as documented by George Osodi (p. ##, ##).

Wildfires and flares are an indication of what Pyne calls the Pyrocene, one of the multiply proliferating terms for the Anthropocene. As I have argued elsewhere,[2] the Anthropocene can be understood as an aesthetic event because it involves the fundamental rearrangement of our sensoria, of the sensations and perceptions of our bodies. Tracing the etymology of "aesthetic" back to its root in the Greek *aisthetikos*, the word aesthetics refers to sensations and perceptions as an interpretational guide for navigating the world. In these

1. Stephen Pyne, "The Fire Age," *Aeon* (May 5, 2015), https://aeon.co/essays/how-humans-made-fire-and-fire-made-us-human [accessed in January 2021].

2. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, "Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London, 2015), pp. 3–31.

Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge. Effect of Fog*, 1903, oil on canvas, 65.3 × 101 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

broad terms, it is through aesthetics, through the interpretation of our senses, that we come to know how quickly and irrevocably the world is changing. The skies in Oregon and California are not what they once were, and even when the fires clear and the particulate matter settles, it will be impossible to not see how they had been, how they darkened out the sun and reddened it into impossible shades, resembling images of Mars.

But these radical rearrangements of the sensory world, the aesthetics of the Anthropocene, are not just about how we navigate in these new and increasingly treacherous realities, but they are also recorded and interpreted through artistic practices. As we gaze at these fires from our screens, we also need to contend with their mediation, with what it means to experience the fires not directly (for many of us), but as mediatic and artistic images. As images, they are often beautiful and terrifying, but also compelling, not unlike the feeling of staring into a campfire. And here is the conundrum that many of us who turn to art as a source of imagination and inspiration are grappling with: What are the dangers of finding beauty in horror?

Anthropocene aesthetics come to be produced through the mediation of climate change, but they are also written into the canons of art, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues. Walter Benjamin's prescient warning, where "self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure," echoes in Mirzoeff.[3] He warns that Anthropocene aesthetics, "comprising both the ancient concept of bodily perception and the modern sense of the

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," in *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

beautiful"[4] often functions within the art-historical canon as an *an*aesthetic. In other words, by rendering beautiful the changes in the biosphere, by canonizing pollution, we risk becoming deadened to the appeal of our senses, to the rapid changes that we perceive all around us. For example, Claude Monet's *Waterloo Bridge. Effect of Fog* (1903, p. ##) captures the smog of industrial London, turning it into the Impressionist genre, making beautiful the glinting particulate matter and the deep pink and red hues of the sun as it rises through an unbreathable atmosphere. It renders the smog seductive, continuous with a broader project where the conquest of nature is seen as natural, good, and right. It serves to anaesthetize the viewer into accepting social or environmental violence through processes of beautification. Artistic production can become a way to naturalize or even proliferate ecocide, enthralled as we are by the beautiful flames.

4. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014), pp. 213–32, esp. p. 270.

5. Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford, 2014).

Lubrication

The saturation of fossil fuels throughout the world, and their attendant greenhouse gases, have changed not just *what* we perceive and sense, but also *how* we perceive and sense. If the Anthropocene is meant as a word to convey the geologic implications of the ravages of an extractive regime, then oil is one subsection of this. This is why it is important to think through oil not only by way of politics or economy, but also through its cultures and aesthetics. The photos that were produced of those skies as the world burned are themselves based on oil media, polymer substrates that are then distributed through the plastic-coated underwater cables that comprise the infrastructures of the Internet. Audiotape, vinyl, and CDs etch the human voice, music, and images onto various synthetic polymers, themselves based in oil. As the English and environmental humanities scholar Stephanie LeMenager writes, "Oil itself is a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms concerned with what counts as culture—from film to recorded music, novels, magazines, photographs, sports, and the wikis, blogs, and videography of the Internet."[5] All of these forms of expression would be impossible without oil. Museums are also incredibly energy-intensive systems, with their specific requirements for heating, cooling, and humidity controls, the custom of always repainting the walls between every show, the use of vinyl lettering, often building new furniture, the global shipping of art, and the use of projectors and other displays—all of these acts depend on fossil fuels. Art and oil cannot easily be disentangled.

The fact that oil is everywhere makes it particularly hard to see and hard to locate; it is therefore hard to launch effective critiques or strategies for resistance. Part of the difficulty of seeing oil is that it is

made to be iridescent, diffractive. It is manufactured to be universal—a stand in for a globality that defies an ecological location. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace oil's trajectory—from where it was extracted to where it ends up—as fuel for a gas tank, or part of the power grid, or as a plastic object. Once it is removed from the Earth, it is removed from any sense of locatedness, becoming a tool for the supposed frictionlessness of global capital supply. Mark Simpson develops the concept of lubricity to describe the slipperiness of oil as a fundamental aspect of "the texture and mood requisite to the operations of neoliberal petroculture. Lubricity offers smoothness as cultural common sense, promoting the fantasy of a frictionless world contingent on the continued, intensifying use of petro-carbons from underexploited reserves."[6] It allows for the surface of the globe to be rendered smooth, where distances are no longer an impediment, and the seas no longer treacherous. The repetition of airplanes in the exhibition *Oil* helps us to see the ways that oil subtends the dreams of smoothness, the gliding of an airplane through the air, removed from earthly matters. For example, the advertisement from Texaco shows the pleasures of this remove; the delight of frictionlessness, of lubrication as a plane, seems to effortlessly ascend to the heavens (p. ##).

But the images of oil also show the way that this dream of a smooth surface has always been a fantasy, linked to the very real frictions of turbulence, free fall, crashes, and warfare. The devastations of war are shown in the darkly satirical photos of Martha Rosler (p. ##), the documents of Margaret Bourke-White (p. ##, ##), or the dread and anticipation of falling warheads as in Gerhard Richter's paintings (pp. ##, ##). The images offer a critical appraisal of the ways that war functions productively within petrocapitalism, as a tool of expansion and greater financial gain. As Anna Tsing provocatively asserts: "Friction is not just about slowing things down. Friction is required to keep global power in motion. . . . Friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing. . . . Friction is not a synonym for resistance."[7] Oil operates as much through the production of a lubricated reality as in the frictions of war, both actively contributing to and shaping the excessively deadly release of fossil fuels and the attendant endlessly expanding capitalist economies. In either its lubricated or frictional states, oil is generative to capital.

The attempt to visualize oil is one strategy in responding to the ubiquity and invisibility of oil. The repetition of various forms of infrastructure helps us to see what is often deliberately situated far from the gaze of people, especially wealthy and white people. Part of what constitutes infrastructures, their definitional quality, is that they permeate the world in a manner in which they are rendered invisible.[8] Warren Cariou, Rena Effendi, and Richard Misrach each document the contemporary landscapes of oil destruction, by photographing oil refiner-

6. Mark Simpson, "Lubricity: Smooth Oil's Political Frictions," in *Petrocultures*, ed. Sheena Wilson and Imre Szeman (Montreal and Kingston, 2017), pp. 287–318, esp. p. 289.

7. Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, 2005), p. 6.

8. Paul N. Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems," in *Modernity and Technology*, ed. Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey, and Andrew Feenberg (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 185–225.

ies, pipelines, and the related devastation to the immediate communities (p. ##–##). They portray the horrors of oil, its aftermaths and familiarities. These images of the infrastructure of oil bring to light the actual processes of oil's transportation and conversion, making visible landscapes that have been completely turned over to the production of profit through oil. This is one strategy of resistance to oil's iridescence, to the way it is hard to locate and to see.

But, when oil saturates the art world, from the production of images themselves, to their shipping, to the reliance upon fossil fuels for storage and preservation, then what do images that reveal, satirize,

Richard Misrach, *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Dow Chemical Corporation (Union Carbide Complex), Taft, Louisiana*, 1998, pigment print, 46.2 × 58.9 cm, courtesy the artist and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

or protest these conditions do? Can we rely upon them as a mode of consciousness raising that will help to change our relations to oil? Or are they simply a mark of objection when other forms of protest have been abandoned or quelled?

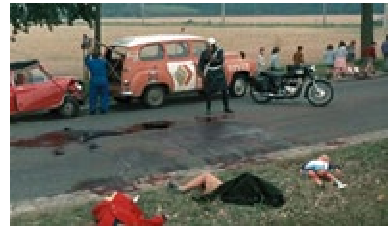
The satirical, absurdist take on these conditions portrayed by Jean-Luc Godard in his film *Weekend* (1967) expresses this deep ambiguity of oil and art. The never-ending traffic jam portrays another form of anaestheticization, the way we have all become accustomed to traffic jams and the deadly carnage of highway transportation. In *Weekend*, these conditions are rendered with a critical, dark humor that shows the complete callousness of the main protagonists, and the

9. Deborah Bird Rose, "Shimmer: When All You Love Is Being Trashed," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, ed. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis, 2017), G51–G63, esp. G53–54.

way that life proceeds alongside the ridiculous conditions of car dependence, pictured through the numerous games and picnics happening on the side of the highway, in addition to the Brechtian additions of the lions and monkeys in cages, and the man who is putting up the sails of his boat. Regardless of one's position, though, there is no way off the highway. Anthropocene aesthetics here operates not only in making the overarching conditions of oil beautiful, but in making them absurd, as a maneuver for critical distance that is not so distant as to evade one's own implication.

Iridescence

Oil is not only embedded within the systems that we know as contemporary art, in some cases as the actual medium, in others as the basis for its distribution and display. Oil is also seductive, creating an allure that is mirrored in good works of art. Deborah Bird Rose develops the concept of "shimmer," borrowing from Yolngu traditions (Aboriginal Australians whose traditional lands are in northeastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia) to describe the brilliance of particular artworks, the way they shine and bring forth a sense of vitality. Shimmer or brilliance illustrates a kind of motion that grabs you: "Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world . . . It is equally a lure: creatures long to be grabbed, to experience that beauty, that surprise, that gleaming ephemeral moment of capture. *Bir'yun*, or shimmer, or brilliance, is—people say—one's actual capacity to see and experience ancestral power."[9] When making art about oil—a process that in most cases is deeply dependent upon fossil fuels, no matter what topic—there might be an inadvertent overuse of shimmer. A successful work of art should have this vitality to it, this brilliance that acts as a lure to draw a viewer in. It should operate not



Weekend (film stills), FRA / ITA, 1967 (OT: *Week-end*), directed / written by Jean-Luc Godard, produced by Raymond Danon

just as an aesthetic experience, but as a capacity to see beyond one's self, to feel the "ancestral power" of the Earth, of our forebearers, to feel life's continuity pulsing, vibrating.

But there might also be a more specific set of relations that one feels in these oil-based media. The ancestral power referenced in *Bir'yun* is the power of the ancestors, but it could also be read as the power of those long-dead organisms, those ancient beings unearthed and unleashed around us in the form of oil. Shimmer can, in these times of the complete saturation of the world in oil, be an iridescent surface that is reflecting back its rainbow colors, connecting us to ancestral power that has not been properly cared for. Oil itself could be understood as a grand-kin, highlighting the connection of our life force now with the lives of those long-dead organisms that appear as oil. But these more-than-human relations have been unearthed, made fungible, weaponized. As the Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd writes in relation to her homelands:

> The fossil fuels which animate the political economy of my home province are a paradoxical kind of kin—the bones of dinosaurs and the traces of flora and fauna from millions of years ago which surface in rocks and loamy earth in Alberta act as teachers for us, reminding us of the life that once teemed here . . . . But, the insatiable desire to liberate these long-gone beings from their resting place, to turn the massive stores of carbon and hydrogen left from eons of life in this place, weaponises these fossil-kin, these long-dead beings, and transforms them into threats to . . . the "narrow conditions of existence," which Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear reminds us we are bound to.[10]

Any artwork that depends upon fossil fuels for their existence, for modes of circulation and display, may be thought of as iridescent, rather than shimmering. For although they might reflect ancestral power, this is a power turned against itself, a power where its own vitality is foreclosed, but one that is nonetheless lively, appealing, endlessly seductive. Iridescence is differentiated from shimmering as it is not the capacity for the vibrancy of the Earth, but instead this same quality that is turned against itself in the proliferation of death. Iridescence is the quality of luminous colors that seem to change when seen from different angles. The weaponization of ancient beings, these fossil-kin, in the service of the sleek surfaces of contemporary aesthetics, is equally shape-shifting, changing color depending on the angle from which we

10. Zoe Todd, "Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in *amiskwaciwâskahikan* and Treaty Six Territory," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (Spring–Summer 2017), pp. 102–07, esp. p. 104.

view them. They are slick and seductive—dangerously so—reminding me of the lure of the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, where the curators put on display the pile up of animals all stuck in the tar. The first was attracted by the iridescent surface, it's gleaming colors and the possibility of food or water. The second got stuck because it tried to eat the first one, and so on. As we create images to capture the horrors and beauty of the Petrol Age, we have to be careful not to replicate this same luminescent lure. The La Brea Tar Pits offer an apt metaphor for the conditions of petrocapitalism, where art seems to serve both as a warning and as a lure.

the German section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in 2018. Since April 2019, Andreas Beitin has been the director of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.

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